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**The Mother's Gaze and the Model Child
Reading Print Ads for Designer Children's Clothing**

ABSTRACT

This audience analysis considers how two groups of mothers, one affluent and mostly white and the other low-income and mostly of color, responded to six print ads for designer children's clothing. I argue that the gender and maternal affiliations of these women—which coalesce around their common experience of the male gaze and a belief that children's clothing represents the embodied tastes of the mother—are ultimately overwhelmed by distinct attitudes towards conspicuous consumption, in-group/out-group signals, and even facial expressions. I conclude that, when judging the ads, these mothers engage in a vicarious process referencing their own daily practice of social interaction. In other words, they are auditioning the gaze through which others will view their own children.

KEY WORDS

advertising, fashion, race, mothers, children

BIO

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INTRODUCTION

Countless scholars have explored the polysemic nature of visual media, but—ironically—most still can't help but privilege their own analytical interpretation of the phenomenon.¹ As a result, the ways that non-specialized viewers actually read advertisements have been heavily theorized but scarcely tested. For example, after reviewing 172 academic articles on visual rhetoric in the fields of communications and consumer research,² Keith Kenny and Linda Scott conclude that most of the authors merely speculate on how visuals are experienced while a precious few attempt a more empirical approach through experiments, surveys and interviews.³ This study aims to help fill the gap in the literature by presenting a comparative audience study of how mothers of different race and class affiliations respond to the same set of visually-dominant full-page print ads for designer children's clothing.

THE TEXTS

The brands under consideration in this study include DKNY, Diesel, Ralph Lauren, Baby Phat, Rocawear, and Guess. All the ads, save Guess,⁴ appeared in 2006 and were pulled from *Cookie*,⁵ an up-scale American parenting magazine targeting affluent mothers.⁶ Considered as a group, the six ads hold three themes in common. First, they represent brand extensions of well-established international designer labels. Second, they contain structural continuities such as logo, set design, clothing style, and color scheme that help reinforce their relationship to similar campaigns promoting the adult brand. Finally, all the ads include very little written text. Most are—in essence—formal portraits of children posing for the camera; only the logo, brand name, and/or brief tag line signal the advertising nature of the appeal.

There are also important differences among the ads. The age of the child models appears to range from about 5-13 and their race varies as well: two ads depict only black models (Rocawear and Baby Phat), three ads depict only white models (DKNY, Diesel, and Guess), and one ad features a bi-racial boy alongside a white girl (Ralph Lauren). Two ads depict only girls (Baby Phat and Guess), two ads only boys (DKNY and Rocawear), and the rest a mix (Diesel and Ralph Lauren).⁷ In sum, I have chosen these ads as much for what they share in common as for how they differ from each other. They all extend well-known adult clothing lines while—at the same time—constituting unique brand identities with distinct representations of race and gender.⁸

I should also note that almost all the ads (with the notable exception of DKNY) depict the child models as being *alone*. That is, there are no adults present in the image. As a result, the ads set up an interesting set of questions. How do mothers viewing these ads identify with the images? Might they compare themselves with an *imaginary* mother standing just off-screen? Or would they attempt to identify with the images of children in a *vicarious* manner—in other words, through their own children? And, finally, are such different forms of identification mutually exclusive? Extending Russell Belk's theory on products as a form of individual self-expression,⁹ Linda Scott backs up and suggests that the initial act of reading an advertisement (well before the purchase of the product) could serve as a virtual test-drive of "imaginative selves for future adoption and communication through objects" such that the image serves as a safe intermediary or "surrogate for the higher risks of trial."¹⁰ In other words, by offering a (free) dress rehearsal of the potential social role assigned by the depicted product, ads invite their readers to identify with the

characters in the ad through a creative “playing out of personal possibilities.”¹¹ In this conception, Scott argues, a visual ad is not a mere representation, “but a representation *as* or a representation *as if*.”¹² In that spirit, this study also seeks to explore an intriguing theoretical possibility: as the mothers view the ads in this study, will they also try them on for size?

THE AUDIENCE

This study is a comparative analysis between two populations: 1) affluent and mostly white mothers (AMs) and 2) low-income mothers of color (LIMs).¹³ All of my informants voluntarily consented to participate in this study and viewed the same six ads for designer children’s clothing. I approached four AMs in the Spring of 2006 through a snow-ball method based on existing social networks.¹⁴ At the time, they all had at least one child under the age of five. In addition, as regular readers of *Cookie*, they were part of the target audience for most of the ads in this study. The AMs were all college educated and married to men with professional jobs. They include: Lori, a white 40-year-old real estate agent living in Boston; Sara, a 31-year-old white photographer also living in Boston; Heather a white 40-year-old stay-at-home mom living on the Upper West Side of New York City; and Peg, an Asian 34-year-old stay-at-home mom living in an exclusive Seattle suburb. I should point out that “affluent” is my own characterization, based on a combination of factors, ranging from their neighborhood, education, dual-incomes, and leisure time. When I asked them directly about their socio-economic status, most of the AM’s replied “average” or “middle-class.” Thus, despite holding significant amounts of cultural and economic capital, the AMs do not imagine themselves as being part of the dominant class. I spoke with them individually by phone, collecting background information ranging from some key demographic information to their tastes in fashion and attitudes towards childhood.¹⁵ I also walked them through a website where I had posted images of the ads.

As for the second population (the LIMs), I was referred by a colleague to a social service agency in Western Massachusetts helping to prepare young mothers for the GED exam while also providing training in professional and life skills.¹⁶ The vast majority of the students are Puerto Rican, with a smattering of Dominicans and African-Americans, and Whites among them. I met with a group of teachers and they agreed to let me come into three classes to conduct hour-long focus groups. I have chosen to concentrate on the first group—the most articulate of the three—in order to flesh out the insights of the six informants in greater detail. Nevertheless, I will occasionally draw on findings from the other two groups as a validity check. It is important to note that most of these informants were between 18-20 years old, significantly younger than the affluent mothers, all of whom were married. In contrast, the LIMs were mostly single, though many had boyfriends. To save time, the LIMs began by filling out a brief pencil and paper survey which asked them a series of “background questions” equivalent to what I had asked the AMs. For example, I asked the LIMs to rank their economic status, except this time on a scale from 1-10. Given that they were all on public assistance, I found it curious that, like the AMs, the LIMs also thought of themselves as being “average” or, as Lupe put it, “I’m not very poor but tampoco [neither am I] rich.” All six members of the first focus group of LIMs ranked themselves as a “5.” We then viewed the ads as a series of individual powerpoint images projected onto a large screen. For each ad, the LIMs paused briefly to

answer some written “reflection questions” before discussing the ad together as a group.¹⁷ At the end, they collectively ranked the ads in order of preference.

In what follows, I will analyze the ads in the same order that they were shown to both the AMs and the LIMs. When quoting the LIMs, I focus primarily on the oral discussion but will occasionally quote from their written responses in order to include the opinions of some of the less vocal participants. When quoting myself, I will use my initials (CB). You may notice that I tend to take my informants’ responses at face value; I generally trust that these women are being sincere. This is a choice that merits a word of caution. Informants, whether interviewed in a focus group or one-on-one, generally want their answers to make sense. Thus, the effect of social desirability tends to mitigate against more irrational and knee-jerk responses. In other words, I do not claim to have access to the messy, raw materials of truth tumbling around inside of their heads. That being said, there are times when I feel it necessary to interpret and unpack polite euphemisms. Another limitation of this type of study stems from its quasi-naturalistic setting. In daily practice, individual magazine advertisements rarely bear the burden of such careful scrutiny. On the contrary, they are generally leafed through, in isolation, and rarely discussed. Future research might devise ways to better measure more immediate and visceral responses.

INTERSECTIONALITY

According to Judith Williamson, advertisers must draw on a system of pre-existing visual referents in order to construct marketing images that will resonate with their intended audiences.¹⁸ In other words, successful ads must refer to the constellations of symbolic schema that we all hold in our heads or risk missing the target altogether. Stuart Hall has argued that such an “encoding/decoding” process is best considered a circuit whereby the lived culture of the audience largely determines the range of options available to the advertiser.¹⁹ Given this dialogic notion of communication, our conception of what actually constitutes one “audience” (as opposed to another) becomes a critical component of our analysis. In other words, just *who* exactly are we talking to? Citing both reader-response theory and Stanley Fish’s groundbreaking work on interpretive communities,²⁰ Scott suggests that the conventional nature of visual texts might allow for “similar readings and shared responses” by “smaller groups within the mass audience who share an attitude, a demographic description, a problem or interest, a consumption habit, a brand loyalty, or a social referent group.”²¹ Edward McQuarrie and David Mick concur, noting how certain visual tropes require a degree of cultural competency or “existing stock of sociocultural insights” that can be exclusive to particular subgroups.²²

Since the study at hand engages two populations of women with distinct racial identifications and class standings, we might be tempted to sketch out the boundaries of unique experience that separate these two interpretive communities. But, as Patricia Hill Collins reminds us, race, class, and gender tend to form junctures of “intersectionality” that can “mutually construct one another” in unexpected ways.²³ For example, a woman might be simultaneously oppressed by one intersection of her identity (living under patriarchy) and yet privileged by another (white and affluent). Collins argues that, unlike any other group, poor women of color are caught in the cross-hairs of a unique and tragic dual-dilemma—they must often tolerate sexism at home in order to ally with men of color against a larger class-based system of white supremacy. In other words, the bonds

of sisterhood—and motherhood—for that matter are always mitigated by surrounding contextual identities such as race and class. As such we might expect the interpretive communities of the two sets of mothers in this study not to be strictly gated and exclusive but also porous and overlapping.

In another example of multiple intersections at work, my own race, education, and age combine to align me much more closely with the AMs in this study: I am white, highly educated, and 33 years old. As a result, we related to each other during the interviews as peers amidst a general atmosphere of mutual understanding. In contrast, when I walked into the social service agency, these same qualities quickly became liabilities. I was the only male in the building, one of just a handful of whites, and the oldest person in the room. I was over thirty, over-educated, and, in many respects, quite clueless. I was, in short, foreign.²⁴ My saving grace was that I spoke some Spanish, though not well enough to keep up with the rapid-fire delivery of most Puerto-Ricans. Thus, my own set of intersectionalities opened a gulf of understanding between me and my subjects; I lacked insight into a whole set of highly developed cultural knowledges that the LIMs held in common. In other words, theirs is a world with an elaborate system of codes and common understandings that, though seeming perfectly transparent to them, often appeared quite opaque to me. An amusing example of this took place when Lakisha, who is black, expressed her intense approval of the Rocawear ad:

Lakisha: Caked up! Caked up!

CB: Did you say 'caked up?'

Lakisha: Yeah.

CB: What does that mean?

Lakisha: Caked up is like Jiggy, like they all g'ed up...they freshened up.

CB: Okay... [everyone laughs] I didn't understand any of that, but all right!

Lakisha: They're properly dressed, they look good. They look good....Those other terms I used, g'ed up, caked up, you know? He's like a 'right, right, the usual.'

[laughter]

CB: I'll go look it up in my hip-hop dictionary when I get home. [laughter]

After indulging my curiosity, Lakisha took pity on my hapless confusion and then translated her street slang into terms that a white guy from the University could more readily understand. She also appeared to delight in demonstrating her in-group expertise in front of an out-group witness. Indeed, as we shall see below, such careful marking of cultural territory is a theme that runs through the history of fashion—especially as an outward expression of class status and racial uplift.

CLASS: DRESSING UP

Writing around the turn of the 20th Century, Thorstein Veblen argued that clothing was a conspicuous form of property apt to be noticed by others.²⁵ He describes how a man can demonstrate his status by wearing an outfit comprised of expensive and fragile fabric ill-suited for hard manual labor. Likewise, he might flaunt his wealth by vesting his wife in similar finery, thereby restricting her from housework (or any other productive task) and putting her on display as a trophy—the vicarious expression of his own wealth. Much has changed since Veblen's original analysis; women have made significant gains towards greater financial independence. I

would like to suggest that, with patriarchy still held firmly in place, mothers operate within a system of cascading levels of vicarious consumption whereby men might still be on top, but women are no longer at the bottom. Just as the fashionable appearance of wives still reflects on the status of the husband, now mothers can demonstrate their own power through their creative and financial control over their children's wardrobe. Moreover, when their child's appearance reflects back on them, mothers are invited to conspicuously and vicariously consume through their children in order to display their own personal taste to others.

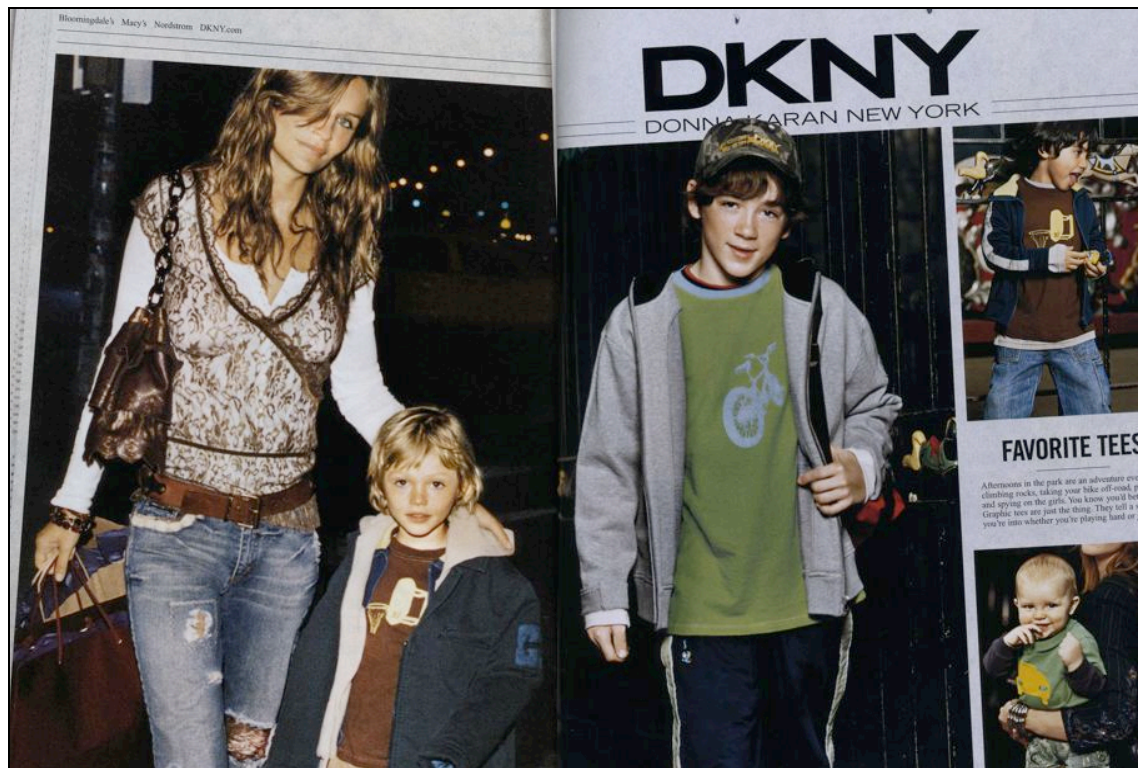
Georg Simmel, a contemporary of Veblen, also describes fashion as an expression of class status, but adds that the process is marked by both invention and rejection: we are what we do *and do not* wear.²⁶ In other words, even as we seek to affiliate ourselves with the elite by donning their expensive and exclusive uniforms, we must also be quick to disrobe once the clothing becomes more affordable and widely available to the masses (p. 189). Pierre Bourdieu concurs, noting that "when they have to be justified, [tastes] are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes."²⁷ But while Veblen and Simmel suggest that class aspiration is one of the principle engines driving the self-destructive fashion cycle of innovation, adoption, and abandonment, Bourdieu argues that the dominant classes reproduce themselves by inadvertently immersing their progeny in a system of social skills, manners and tastes. Simply put, even if one is born rich, training is required so that, over time, designer clothing feels less like a conscious decision and more like a natural fit. Moreover, the consistency and coherence of a brand, along with its perennial marketing campaigns of identity reinforcement, make it an attractive, and reliable, expression of "embodied tastes," Bourdieu's term for the outward manifestation of an inward orientation.

RACE: "KEEPING IT REAL"

Thus far we have seen how clothing can heighten class status through acts of vicarious consumption, the rejection of popular styles, and the expression of embodied tastes. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that all Americans would consume the same things if only they had the money; fashion does not always trickle down the social pyramid, it can also gurggle up from below. For black Americans in particular, clothing was and remains highly charged with connotative meanings of dominance, submission, and resistance. Elizabeth Chin describes how, during slavery, white masters severely restricted what their human property was permitted to wear such that, after emancipation, owning clothing became a demonstration of "independence and personhood" that helped mitigate the humiliation of once being owned.²⁸ Furthermore, Graham White and Shane White recount how, in dressing up for church or just a Saturday night dance, poor blacks "were repudiating white society's evaluation of the black body as an instrument of menial labor."²⁹ Even in the post-Civil Rights era, Regina Austin reports how blacks often attempt to compensate for racial profiling by dressing up, flashing credit cards, even buying extraneous items.³⁰ Thus, even when they pursue respectability and assimilation through traditional forms of material consumption, many black Americans are still marked by their own skin—a brand which remains a permanent, visible sign of past oppression.

But, in a critical turn, the hip-hop iteration of designer fashion offers black consumers the opportunity to claim upward mobility while simultaneously affirming their downtrodden cultural heritage. For instance, the break-out success of hip-hop fashion is based on a recognition of race as a brand, marketable not in spite of, but because of its distinction from the dominant culture. Kembrew McLeod has even argued that hip-hop's obsession with "keeping it real" requires its cultural products to continually refer back to its origins, namely "the streets" of urban ghettos

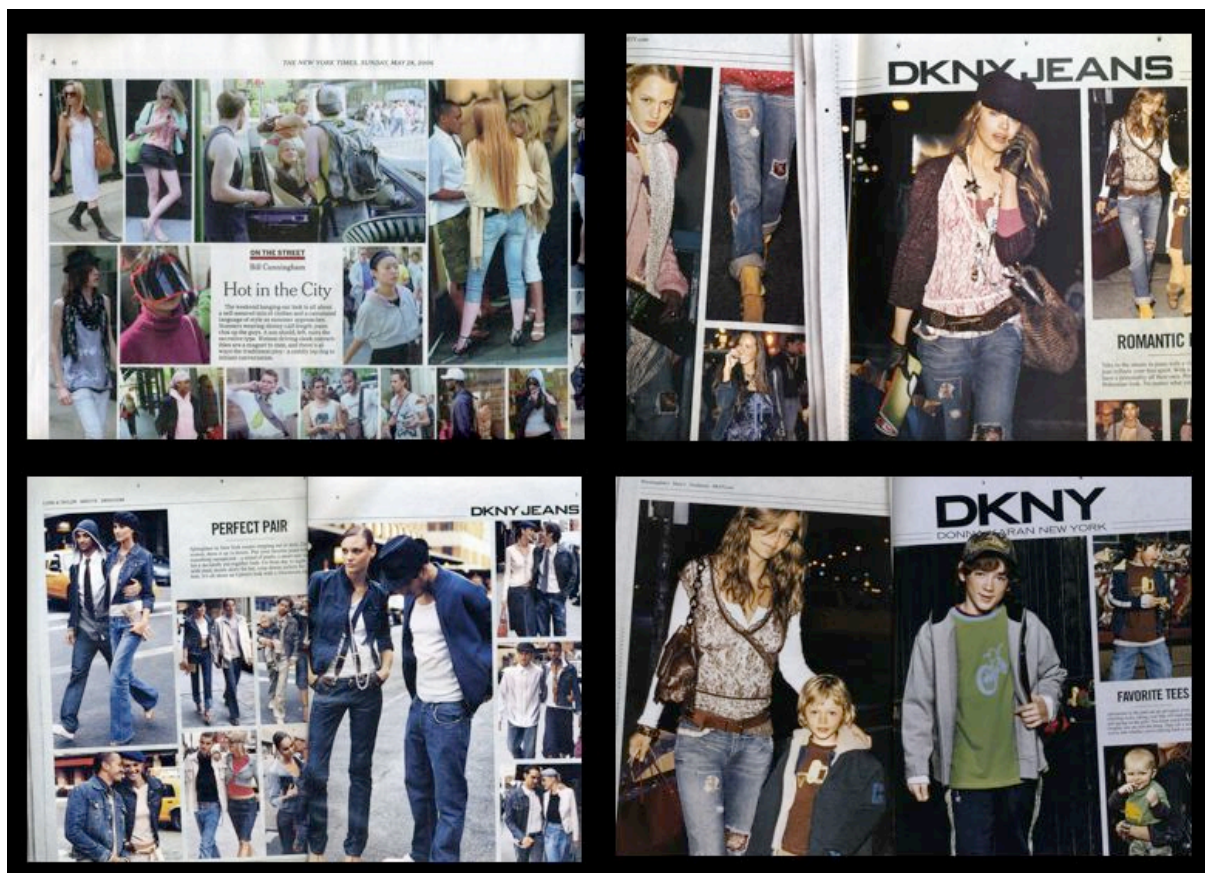
populated by poor African-Americans.³¹ This is hardly “aspirational” in the traditional sense, since, in a provocative reversal of Simmel, hip-hop fashion seeks to affiliate with disenfranchised sectors of society. In this conception, the excesses of “Ghettofabulous” and “Bling-Bling” styles, so often maligned as exploitative and destructive forms of materialism, take on more political implications: by consuming expensive, designer hip-hop fashion, the descendants of slaves can claim their rightful place in the culture, but on their own terms.³² Thus, we have seen how, throughout history, style has been mobilized to establish in-group/out-group boundaries that isolate and/or insulate particular groups. Indeed, one of the central pleasures of clothing choice is still the dialectical promise of an adventurous, yet socially sanctioned, personal expression whereby an individual can stand out from one crowd, while joining another.



DKNY Ad (*Cookie*, January 2006, p. 11-12)

DKNY: INTENDED (AND UNINTENDED) MESSAGES

The DKNY ad has an unusual lay-out. Eschewing the photographic realism of the other ads in this study, which depict a single image in full-bleed color, this ad places four apparently candid photos of various sizes onto a light grey background which includes the brand name written in the style of a bold headline, a small paragraph of text, and a series of perforations along the far edge. The largest image depicts a white mother and her young son walking on a city street at night. When I first saw the ad, it rang a bell. Surely I had seen this assembly of signifiers before. Sure enough, when I compared the DKNY ad with “On the Street,” a regular trend-spotting feature in the *New York Times*’ “Sunday Style” section, the resemblance was uncanny: same lay-out, candid photos, newspaper style text, printing press perforations etc. But would the mothers in my study make the same connection? Yes and no.



DKNY Ads and the “On the Street” Section of the *New York Times* (top left)

For the AMs, the format struck a chord. Sara said it reminded her of “some photos in like *People* magazine or something showing like stars kids walking or something” while Lori said that it “doesn’t look like an ad” and reminded her of a “scene story” from a supermarket tabloid: “Elle McPherson was seen with her daughter at the bla-bla-bla.” Thus we can see how both Sara and Lori’s previous reading experiences with *People* and tabloids (AKA: existing referent systems) shape their decoding of the DKNY ad. Heather’s response was more personal: “My first thought is ‘Hey, she hangs out in my playground!’” She even tried to guess the location of the photo shoot: “New York, East Village, SoHo, Tribeca maybe?” Heather’s reaction makes sense, because these are the kinds of exclusive neighborhoods that she often frequents. When asked to rank this ad along with the others in this study in terms of preference, the AM’s tended to place DKNY somewhere in the middle. In contrast, the LIM’s initial reaction was one of bewilderment followed by hostility:

Julia: Wha?

Cindy: Who the hell is she?

Lakisha: Why do her clothes look like crap? [laughter]

Lupe: I don’t understand this.

CB: What’s your gut reaction? Positive or negative?

All: Negative!

Cindy: That shit’s gotta’ go!

When I asked what first caught their eye, Lakisha responded, “Her daughter.” Hilarity ensued when Julia pointed out that the “girl” was actually a boy: “that’s a boy! [laughter] That looks like a girl though! Holy crap!” But when I asked the group if the ad reminded them of anything they’d seen before, the LIM’s were quick to connect the image to a familiar referent:

Maria: Drama in the other magazines.

Lupe: When they talk about their clothing and shit.

Julia: Oh yeah, in People.

Lupe: You know how they write ‘Oh, look at this day when they wore the most ugliest outfit.’

Lakisha: They compare the worst dressed at the time.

Lupe: She looks famous.

Thus, despite their contrasting evaluations of the ad,³³ in the end, both the AMs and LIMs decoded the visual lay-out through the same lens: celebrities appearing in *People* magazine. It would seem that the ad, as a communicative act, was successful: the intended message was received. Or was it? No one, neither AM nor LIM, mentioned “On the Street” or the *New York Times*.



Diesel Kids Ad (*Cookie*, January 2006, p. 29)

DIESEL: MOTHERS JUDGING OTHER MOTHERS

The Diesel ad features a group of children, ranging from about four to ten years-old, wearing eccentric clothing—a style I would describe as “retro-bohemian 1950’s greaser gang.” They are leaning against a railing, apparently waiting for someone to come or something to happen. They are, in short, cool, calm, and collected. Even the colors are muted, adding to the bleak, somber mood. All the mothers, both AMs and LIMs, were largely in agreement that the kids looked “bored” and “unhappy” like “they don’t want to be there” and the general consensus was that this brand was not for them. But when asked who would buy these clothes, the two groups diverged. The AMs described a mother who was very deliberate in chasing trends and displaying her wealth through conspicuous consumption:

Heather: This seems mostly like people with money...it’s fancy very fancy.

Peg: Parents who want to make a statement and have too much money to spend?

CB: What kind of statement?

Peg: That they’re better?

In contrast, the LIMs interpreted the mis-matched, eccentric clothing as a sign of maternal neglect.

Lakisha: You know how there’s some mothers out there who get all jiggied up and you look at their kids and they’re all bummed out or same clothes or da-da-da-da.

Julia: Different colors—

Lakisha: I mean she looked like she didn’t even care like ‘Come on, hurry up and put your clothes on and let’s go!’

Julia: —different socks.

Thus, for many of the LIMs, the children in the Diesel ad looked like they had dressed themselves and the unfortunate results ultimately reflected poorly on the (hypothetical) mother. In other words, a child’s style was seen as a vicarious expression of the mother’s taste and values, even her degree of care and concern. For the LIMs, their kids came first, even if it meant sacrificing their own wardrobe. As Maria put it, “I’d wear anything like from Kmart so that he could buy some sneakers at the mall.”

The AMs concurred that they wanted their child to look nice, but most added that the clothing should be durable and practical, not “over the top.” In other words, class positioning is not always upwardly aspirational. For example, Heather (AM) related a story which was less about keeping up with Joneses than steering clear of their gaudy excesses:

There was this one girl in [my daughter’s] class last year who came in designer stuff constantly and I know that her mom spent a ka-zillion dollars on her daughter’s wardrobe and would buy a whole spring line from a certain blah and give trunk shows in her apartment and stuff like that and she really was kinda’ peeved when the child would come home with paint on it.

Heather clearly relished the poetic justice of this mother's inevitable comeuppance and I found it quite astonishing that affluent mothers could subscribe to an upscale magazine like *Cookie* and yet still manage to engage in a spirited critique of conspicuous and wasteful consumption. Perhaps this helps explain their preference for the middle rung on the class totem pole—a place where their own culture is not only defined by the unwashed masses below, but also the filthy rich above. Heather's scolding also demonstrates how mothers watch each other, often casting judgment based on how the children are dressed. Peg (AM) openly admitted that she fears the judgment of other parents, noting that she would never allow her children to wear baggy clothes—an oblique reference to hip-hop clothing—because it sends the wrong signal, not only about them, but about her:

It doesn't represent a good image—this may sound very prejudice—but it doesn't say 'well-raised kids'...it doesn't say that you respect your own image very well. I know that that's the trend, but it's not something that I accept in my household.



Ralph Lauren Kids Ad (*Cookie*, March/April 2006, pp. 7-8)

RALPH LAUREN: “HE’S DRESSED TOO WHITE”

The Ralph Lauren ad is a two-page spread featuring two portraits. On the left is a light-skinned African American boy, who looks about seven, dressed in a pink shirt, paisley tie, and tan tweed suit with a yellow sweater draped over his shoulders. He is standing in front of the weathered shingles of a beach house, looking off to the side, and smiling. On the right is a white, blonde girl of similar age standing in a field wearing a white trench coat and staring directly into the camera. For AMs and LIMs alike, the Ralph Lauren ad was a hit.

The LIMs were effusive in their written responses (“That is cute...Love it...I like it a lot”) describing the image as “fun” and “happy” and praising the clothing as perfect for “special occasions” like going out to a restaurant or to church. For Lupe, the typical customer was any mother, not necessarily rich, “who can afford it” and for Julia, it was simply “a mother with good taste.” The second LIM group had an equally positive reaction to the Ralph Lauren ad, writing that the kids were “cute....high class....dressed up for Easter,” but also added an interesting set of caveats. When a Puerto-Rican mother protested “He’s dressed too white,” an African American mother defended the ad, saying “He looks cute because you don’t see little dark boys dressed like that!” After some debate, the group singled out the yellow sweater as the problem—it reminded them of a country club and prompted another Puerto-Rican mother to conclude “that’s got to be a white mom [laughter].” I can only wonder how they might have responded to a similar ad featuring a truly “dark” boy in preppie clothing. In this case, would his race overcome the cultural meaning of his clothing or vice-versa?

Such a dilemma points to one of the fundamental challenges of measuring audience responses to the complicated system of signs that can be assembled by a single image. Not only do the signs access the subjective referent systems of each viewer, but they also intersect and interact with each other *inside the text*. For example, a yellow sweater could very well look “whiter” when combined with light black skin. Interestingly, no one suggested that the boy’s “white” style of clothing pointed to a “white dad,” thus reinforcing an idea elaborated above: a child’s clothing reflects directly on the mother. Indeed, the collective experience of these mostly single mothers reinforces wider patriarchal assumptions about women’s childcare responsibilities in general.



Baby Phat Girlz Ad (*Cookie*, January 2006, p. 55)

BABY PHAT: EXTRA-TEXTUAL KNOWLEDGE

The Baby Phat ad depicts two African American girls holding paper fans, surrounded by wooden lanterns, and flanked by orange-tinged rice paper walls, a purple neon Baby Phat sign, and vertical strips of blurred Asian characters. Members of both groups brought extra-textual knowledge to bear on the interpretation of the ad, but with drastically different results. For example, Lori (AM) did not even need to see the ad in order to form a strong opinion about it:

I know who's line this is and, I don't know, I guess I've got—not a bad taste in my mouth—but I just don't like the woman who designs these [CB: Kimora Lee?] Oh my God, she's obnoxious to me! So, just even looking at her ads, I'm like Ugh! [laughter] You know cause she's kind of all out there.

Lori is referring to Kimora Lee Simmons, erstwhile wife of Russell Simmons, the rap music producer turned entrepreneur who created the Phat Farm brand and is widely credited as one of the founding fathers of hip-hop fashion.³⁴ A former model herself, Kimora Lee is now the creative director of Baby Phat, an off-shoot of Phat Farm. Recent Baby Phat campaigns have featured Kimora Lee and her daughters posing on their vast estate, complete with luxury automobiles, maids, and butlers. Such blunt visual associations clearly attempt to connect the Baby Phat brand to Kimora Lee's own, high-profile lifestyle.

The LIMs also interpreted this ad from a highly partisan position. But, in this case, most readily identified themselves with hip-hop culture³⁵ and already owned Baby Phat clothing, perfume, jewelry etc., so when they saw the ad, they instantly screamed their approval:

Lakisha: That's a definite A-plus!

Lupe: I love Baby Phat.

Maria: That picture's hot!

The LIMs raved about Kimora Lee's beauty, debated whether she was still married to Russell Simmons and finally decided that the two girls in the picture, were, in fact, her daughters. Thus, despite the differing evaluations of Lori (AM) and the LIMs, both responses follow the same logic: in order to truly see Baby Phat one must look through Kimora Lee. In other words, though she does not appear in this particular ad, the idea of Kimora Lee is invoked by the brand.

But what if the viewer has never heard of Kimora Lee? AMs Sara and Peg found it odd to place African American girls in such a quasi-Asian setting. The LIMs, in contrast, made no such comments—perhaps because they knew something about the girls' mother that Peg and Sara didn't. Kimora Lee's mother is Asian-American. In fact, her daughters are named Ming and Aoki, so perhaps they are not so “out of place” after all. But *where* are they exactly? The LIMs did not seem to care, but AMs Peg and Heather harbored some pretty grave concerns:

Peg: The background just doesn't look good to me...you see this kinda' environment in a really sleazy part of Asia...especially the neon sign...you don't associate that sort of thing with kids...that makes me think of one of those strip clubs in Thailand—it was like 'whoa!' Yeah, as a mother, it's not something that I picture kids in.

Heather: The whole notion, it looks almost like they're in a red light district of somewhere far away and it seems inappropriate and not very kidlike.³⁶

So, for Peg and Heather, the setting of the photo referenced highly charged symbols of pornography and prostitution. And, in Heather's case, she was only able to interpret the attitude of the girls *through the context* of the surrounding environment:

They look a little 'take no prisoners' [laughter] I'm not sure I'd let [my daughter] play with them. They look very sure of themselves, almost and maybe that's because I imagine them in a scarier place....the older one looks very 'I got attitude, don't mess with me.'

Peg (AM) had similar apprehensions, concurring that the girls were “not exactly approachable kids.” Thus, Peg and Heather read signs of danger when interpreting both the ad's setting and the “don't mess with me” attitudes of the models such that the ads represented a hypothetical threat to the well-being of their own children—the Baby Phat models were playmates to be avoided. The LIMs had a different take, one less interested in the location of the scene (“China?”) and more focused on the apparent self-confidence of the young models:

Sofia: They're serious. Looking all professional.

Lupe: Like they got it like that. They think they look good.

Julia: They look like they done this before....she knows what she's doing.

Lakisha: Talk to my agent.

In contrast to the AMs, the LIMs not only reveled in the familiar Baby Phat aesthetic but also celebrated the perceived attitude of professionalism. In their eyes, the young models were neither in danger, nor posing a threat to others—they were in control. As we shall see in the next section, the second hip-hop clothing ad in this study elicited a similar set of polarized reactions.



Rocawear Kids Ad (Cookie, January 2006, p. 71)

ROCAWEAR: TOUGH LOVE

The Rocawear ad features three dark-skinned African-American boys posing on a street curb in front of a row of brownstone apartments. They all wear serious expressions, and two look slightly down at the camera. One of the boys is wearing a pinstriped wool blazer and has his arms folded and his head cocked to one side. Most of the AMs said that this brand was not for them and all thought that the ad was altogether too threatening:

Peg: It's just too 'gangster look' ...they don't look very approachable...especially the one on the left, he looks like someone who would challenge you if you stared at him too long. [laughter] Well, all three of them do.

Sara: It makes little boys look like they're really tough and possibly up to no good.

Lori: The kids look really tough....I don't like that....staring you down.

Heather: These guys look a little meaner [compared to other ads].

In contrast, the LIMs whooped and hollered, embracing both brand and ad alike with great enthusiasm.³⁷ They identified with the ad completely; it was one of theirs:

Julia: Whoooo!

Sofia: I love it!

Lakisha: I like that! Hell yeah. Sure.

Lupe: The clothes is hot. They macking. They balling. They look good.

Sofia: They probably thinking like, 'You know we look good.'

Lakisha: [starts singing a rap song]

Sofia: They look like niggas from the hood!

Maria: Gangsta look.

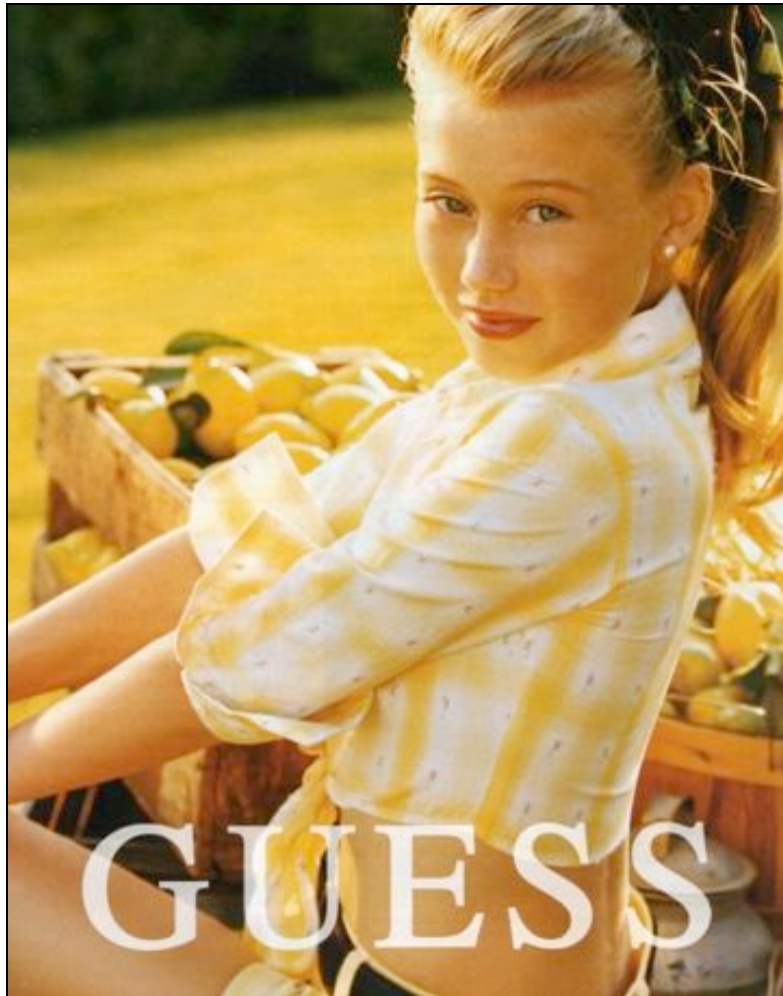
Lakisha: Thank God for Jay-Z!

Sofia: Rocawear's the bomb!

As we saw with Baby Phat, notice the emphasis on the achievement of these models. The LIMs recognized that these boys intend to look attractive and are quick to honor their success. The level of identification was so strong, in fact, it was as though many of the LIMs were regarding not an advertisement, but a family photo—literally cheering it on. Extra-textual knowledge also played a key role as Lakisha immediately connected the brand to its founder: the rapper and hip-hop mogul, Jay-Z. Even some of the evaluative language used to describe the ad (i.e.: “caked up,” “niggas,” and “gangsta”) further emphasized the LIMs affiliation with hip-hop, embodying the genre’s “syncretic” tendency to appropriate and modify existing signifiers from mainstream culture.³⁸ For example, the racist epithet of white supremacy (nigger) has been customized and redeployed among blacks, and later among people of color in general, as a term of endearment (nigga). Therefore, I interpret Sofia’s remark that “they look like niggas from the hood” as a form of intimate recognition rather than outright condemnation. Indeed, much of the power of such modified language stems from its exclusivity; few AMs would dare utter “nigga” in public, nor would I. We know it is not our word. Thus, when praising an ad she has claimed as her own, Sofia also mobilized a proprietary expression—a syncretic signifier of hip-hop which offers a specific kind of recognition unique to her in-group even as it polices cultural boundaries that keep white folks like me on the outside.

So, when evaluating responses to the Baby Phat and Rocawear ads, we can see intersectionality hard at work, both restricting and allowing certain forms of identification and discourse according to one’s particular combination of race/class/gender identities. For example, the mostly white AMs and the LIMs of color had diametrically opposed reactions to the only two ads in the study featuring all black child models. Therefore, it would seem that race could be the determining interpretive factor for these two groups of mothers. For example, the facial expressions of the (white) Diesel kids were just as serious as the black models, but none of the AMs described them as threatening. As McLeod points out, hip-hop culture circulates and is made legible through its evocation of certain codes and conventions: “being authentic, or keeping it real, means staying true to yourself (by identifying oneself as being both hard and black).”³⁹ Perhaps the very same signifiers that the AMs interpret as connoting danger are recognized by the LIMs as

symbols of cultural affirmation: the boys are authentic, black, hard, unapologetic, and fearless. In other words, depending on the intersectionality of the audience, a “tough” pose can be read in (at least) two different ways: 1) an out-group might see menace and hostility while 2) the in-group sees only defiance and self-respect. If we recall that hip-hop often defines itself against white culture, then we can imagine how the Rocawear ad might very well have been deliberately encoded to offend white audiences like the AMs. To wit, if too many suburban whites began to buy Rocawear, the brand’s cultural meaning—and its authentic connection to hip-hop—could become quite tenuous indeed.



Guess Kids (*Child*, March 2005 p. 12)

GUESS: THE MALE GAZE

The Guess ad features a medium close-up of a white girl who looks to be about ten years-old. She is blonde and wears light make-up, earrings, a halter-top and yellow shorts. She has placed both her hands on one knee and is arching her torso forward while smiling slightly and addressing the camera over one shoulder. Behind her we can see crates of fresh lemons glistening in the sun. The ad elicited strong negative reactions from both AMs and LIMs. For these mothers, there is a line between cute and inappropriate, and Guess crossed it.

The AMs echoed variations on a common theme. Sara: “I think it’s too sexual. Giant mid-riff and looking coy like a little girl... I don’t like that connection between children and sexuality.” Peg: “It just conveys a lot of negativity to me. At that age, you don’t need to look sexy. You don’t need to show half your butt to the World.” Lori: “They’re trying to make her look way older than she is. I don’t like that. She’s a girl, she’s a child, she shouldn’t—you know—yeah, I don’t like that...She’s showing skin for like—she’s a kid!” Heather: “The way she’s sitting and the way she’s showing a lot of skin seems very grown up to me and the make-up...so it seems a little provocative...teasing and come and get me.” Lori went further, noting that, if she had a daughter, inappropriate clothing could invite the wrong kind of male gaze: “I just think ‘you never know who’s around’ and I don’t want people looking at her in any kind of a way other than that she’s a child.” Sara was more blunt. After describing how she restricted her daughter from wearing any “hot pants, cropped shirts with bare belly showing, a thong” she explained that her rationale was quite simple: “I don’t want her to be attractive to predators.”

For the AMs, then, the Guess ad was problematic in two ways. First, the child model was made to look more mature than her actual age—the combination of a revealing outfit and a provocative pose creating the sexualized portrait of a prepubescent girl. The second problem is more complex because it requires the AMs to look at the image through the eyes of someone else. It is only by channeling the hypothetical gaze of a male pedophile or child molester that they are able to determine that the girl in the Guess ad is ‘asking for trouble.’ Perhaps this move is to be expected. After all, both Berger (1972) and Mulvey (1975) have argued that visual culture consistently positions women as objects of desire, displayed to attract and flatter the heterosexual “male gaze.”⁴⁰ So it would follow that, in this case, the AMs appraised the Guess girl as men might but—importantly—this view was also refracted by a protective maternal subjectivity highly sensitive to the threat of sexual abuse.

As for the inappropriate nature of the ad, the LIMs were in almost complete agreement, but arrived at a different set of conclusions. Lupe: “That’s not for your girl, that doesn’t look like a girl to me.” Sofia: “She looks like a teenager, an adolescent.” Lakisha: “Hell no, is she showing her stomach? No, I’m sorry, but no.” Julia: “I wouldn’t like my daughter to wear clothes that show her body.” When Lupe said she wouldn’t let her daughter dress like the Guess girl, I asked her why, and her response triggered a collective testimonial of young women who both invite and must endure the constant glare of the male gaze:

Lupe: I know how niggas think! [lots of nodding]

Lakisha: Beep-Beep! You better keep it moving son and stop playing! My daughter will be 12 years-old, would you like to get shot? [laughter] For real, I’ll take a freakin’ BB gun and shoot your freakin’ [indecipherable] off!

Maria: If I was to see my daughter do the same shit I did, I would kill her. Cause I used to sneak out to be out and that was it. I didn’t care what anybody said, I used to wear crazier shit than [the Guess ad].

CB: And your goal when you wore that ‘shit,’ what was your goal?

Maria: To go [snaps her fingers] trickin’! [raucous laughter]

CB: So, to say it in a different way, you wanted to attract men.

Maria: I don't know, that's how I see it. When you wear your little shit and you know you look good and you gonna' go to the street to get hollered at. So don't even go there.

Lakisha: I'm not even gonna' lie.

Maria: Don't even lie.

Lakisha: You know my Mom blessed me with a be-jang-tang! But it's not that, I could be walking and wearing pajama pants and a tank top--

Maria: It's true!

Lakisha: It's not our fault. People could be covered up. It doesn't matter what you're wearing--

Maria: Girls in hoodies, lookin' like dudes, still get hollered at!

Lupe was all-to-aware that men objectify her sexually and did not wish the same gaze to be directed at her daughter. Lakisha shifted into mother mode to keep her daughter's suitors at bay, then complained that part of her own anatomy (her "be-jang-tang") was both a blessing and a curse that not even plain clothes could conceal from the male gaze. Most remarkable, though, is Maria, who actually saw herself in the ad. When Lupe first admitted that she too used to dress like the Guess ad "back in the day," the other LIMs laughed and nodded as though they had all been caught in the act. But this was not just the corporate confession of a group of hypocrites, it was the collective acknowledgement of a hard lesson learned:

Julia: What you're saying is that even though we used to do it, now you've got a daughter and you don't want that to happen again.

Lupe: Yeah, 'cause we used to do it--

Lakisha: That's true, but back in the day it wasn't as bad as it is now.

Julia: Little girls 11, 12-years-old be having kids now.

Lakisha: I know a girl, she's 13 and she's on her second kid.

Sofia: Every year it keeps going down in age.

Maria: It's like the style now.

Thus, the general consensus of this group of LIMs was that dressing like the Guess girl was what got them into trouble in the first place; provocative clothing put them on the path to teen pregnancy. Unlike the AMs, they did not suggest that the wrong fashion choice might accidentally lure a random stalker who would abduct and sexually abuse their child—a widespread fear which is so statistically improbable that it might be better characterized as a form of moral panic (Levine, 2002).⁴¹ Rather, the LIMs were speaking from the standpoint of their own concrete experience. Furthermore, in this female-only space (myself not withstanding), they formed gender bonds of solidarity around their regrets in getting pregnant by the wrong men and their desires to help their own children avoid a similar fate: "now you've got a daughter and you don't want that to happen again."

The Guess ad thus provides an interesting test for Collins' (2002) theoretical construct of intersectionality. In one respect, mothers across the race/class divide came to consensus—condemning the ad—largely through their daily exposure, as women, to the male gaze. But while their common gender identity may have brought the two groups

together, their distinct experiences of motherhood drove them apart. For the AMs, a sexually inappropriate ad conjured up the specter of an unknown pedophile lurking in the shadows hoping to prey on their (real or hypothetical) daughter. For the LIMs, the same image reminded them, on two levels, of the recent history of their own lived experience. First, they recalled the ways in which they used to dress during early puberty in order to deliberately attract the attention of the male gaze. Indeed, due to their young age, this memory was still fresh. Second—and this is a profound difference—the LIMs acknowledged that their path to motherhood was problematic and something they would not wish on their own children.

I should note that both the AMs and LIMs fully embraced motherhood and many in both groups expressed pride in their parenting skills. Nevertheless, the apparent circumstances of their individual pregnancies were dramatically different—ranging from methodical and deliberate (AMs) to sudden and unexpected (LIMs). Moreover, the LIMs may have actually been the victims of real predators: older males who took advantage of their immaturity and inexperience. But, if this was the case, none of the LIMs blamed their pregnancy on anyone else. Rather, Maria and Lakisha took responsibility for their actions, even mocking the fathers of their children. Maria: “What the hell did I think when I got with that?” Lakisha: “Why in the heck did I even go that far? I must have been in a daze...I look at him now and I’m like ‘ugh!’” Though I doubt that this story of personal accountability and regret—one where the men are summarily dismissed as buffoons—provides us with a full picture of the power dynamics surrounding their pregnancies, it is nonetheless the story that Maria and Lakisha tell themselves—one where they are the protagonists enacting their own desires. This is to say that, in reading the Guess ad, the AMs’ maternal instinct feared sexual threats from without while the LIMs recognized the potential dangers that come from within.

CONCLUSION: THE MOTHER’S GAZE

The various intersectionalities of distinct audiences can conspire to both unite and/or divide their visual interpretations. In this study, the AMs and LIMs drew on their own subjective experiences of class standing and racial identification in order to arrive at different conclusions. But, along the way, they traversed some common ground. First, despite their distinct socio-economic backgrounds, these mothers are occasionally brought together as a media audience of magazines like *People*, so common at supermarket check-out lines. Whether due to a collective, and highly gendered, culture of shopping or just mere coincidence, the result is the same: a shared signifier that creates a semiotic overlap between otherwise separate visual referent systems. Second, by acknowledging that their child’s clothing reflects directly on them, both groups described a process whereby mothers judge each other’s embodied tastes through the vicarious consumption of their children. Finally, as women, both groups conveyed how their intense awareness of the male gaze allows them to recognize, and compels them to resist, images that sexualize young girls.

Apart from this interesting set of similarities, my comparative analysis of AMs and LIMs suggests that, in the end, it is the cultural *differences* between these two groups that creates the most salient interpretive frames for the ads. In other words, their common identity as women and mothers is not enough to overcome the intersections that divide them according to age, class, and race. First, in the case of the Guess ad, age trumped

race as young women of color identified with the child model who, despite being white, reminded them of their own mistakes in the recent past. Second, while the AMs sought to down-shift and claim middle-class status by rejecting the conspicuous consumption of their peers, the LIMs openly aspired to climb up the same social pyramid already conquered by Kimora Lee Simmons. Finally, racial identification produced the most dramatic differences between the groups. Viewing the two ads with all black models (Baby Phat and Rocawear) inspired the AMs to see a threat where the LIMs saw only pride. Conversely, despite sharing a common reference, the mothers split on their evaluation of the all-white DKNY ad: the AMs were fairly neutral and the LIMs quite hostile. Thus, the race of the models encoded the ads with important in-group/out-group signals. Even the Ralph Lauren ad, which tried to finesse race/class divides by dressing a light-skinned black boy in a preppie sweater, achieved mixed results.

If we recall Simmel (1997), it would seem that fashion, and its interpretation, operates through a referent system of affinity and distinction. Just as hip-hop fashion often contrasts its signifiers against white, mainstream culture, so do audiences seek to parse out the particular intersectional allegiances of any given brand. I would like to suggest that such a diagnostic gaze is not limited to the decoding of advertisements—far from it. As mothers judge print ads for designer children’s clothing, they are engaged in a process which references their daily lived practices of social interaction. In other words, they are *auditioning* the gaze through which others might view their own children should they choose to wear these clothes in public. Thus, the gaze they employ in evaluating the ad is necessarily vicarious: what do I want other people to think when they look at my child? By treating the ads’ representations of other children “*as if*” they were their own, these mothers are testing the waters with a dress rehearsal—which is why identification is so important. Mothers must first be able to place their own child inside the ad before donning the virtual goggles of another mother, a man, or—God forbid—a pedophile.

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¹ This is not to dismiss the important contribution made by much of this theoretical work, often rooted in the tradition of semiotics. For instance, Judith Williamson offers an interesting discussion of visual interpretation through preexisting referent systems in *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising*. (London: Boyars, 1978) while Stuart Hall gives a classic treatment of the how audiences might choose a hegemonic, negotiated, or oppositional reading of any given media text in "Encoding/Decoding." in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001) 166.

³ Keith Kenney and Linda Scott. "A Review of the Visual Rhetoric Literature." in *Persuasive Imagery: A Consumer Response Perspective*, ed. Linda M. Scott and Rajeev Batra, 17 (London: LEA, 2003). For two examples that mix semiotic analysis with experiments and interviews, see Edward McQuarrie and David Mick's "Visual Rhetoric in Advertising: Text-Interpretive, Experimental, and Reader-Response Analyses." *Journal of Consumer Research* 26, no. 1 (1999): 37 and Barbara Phillips' "Thinking into it: Consumer Interpretation of Complex Advertising Images." *Journal of Advertising* 26, no. 2 (1997): 77. Paul Messaris offers a forward-looking view on the emerging forms of measuring visual communication in "Visual Communication: Theory and Research." *Journal of Communication* 53, no. 3 (2003): 555.

⁴ The Guess ad came from a 2005 special fashion issue of *Child Magazine*. Though not as upscale in editorial lay-out or audience demographics as *Cookie*, *Child* remains a key player in children's clothing, as evidenced by its recent hosting of the third annual children's fashion show during the 2007 Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week in New York City.

⁵ These ads are part of coordinated campaigns that extend well beyond the confines of *Cookie*. Many also appear in other parenting magazines like *Child* and more hip-hop-friendly publications like *Vibe* and *The Source*.

⁶ *Cookie* claims to reach women age 25 to 44 with children age 0 to 9 and household income at \$75,000 plus per year. Retrieved December 4, 2006, from <http://condenastmediakit.com/coo/circulation.cfm>.

⁷ The only brands in this study exclusively oriented to a particular gender are Baby Phat (girls) and Rocawear (boys).

⁸ For a more detailed semiotic analysis of some of the ads in this study, as well as a careful consideration of their particular mode of address, please see Chris Boulton, "Don't Smile for the Camera: Black Power, Para-Proxemics and Prolepsis in Print Ads for Hip-Hop Clothing." *International Journal of Communication [Online]*, 1, no. 1 (2007). Available at: <http://ijoc.org/ojs/index.php/ijoc/article/view/88>

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¹⁰ Linda Scott. "The Bridge from Text to Mind: Adapting Reader-Response Theory to Consumer Research." *Journal of Consumer Research* 21, no. 3 (1994): 473.

¹¹ Scott, *The Bridge*, 477.

¹² Linda Scott. "Images in Advertising: The Need for a Theory of Visual Rhetoric." *Journal of Consumer Research* 21, no. 2 (1994): 267.

¹³ I have changed the names of my research subjects in order to protect their identities.

¹⁴ I also interviewed two other affluent mothers whose responses were similar to the other four but ultimately offered less insight. So, in the interest of space, I have excluded them from this study.

¹⁵ To view the phone interview schedule, please visit <http://www.chrisboulton.org/academics/clothingstudy.html>

¹⁶ Kennaria Brown. "Good Women Becoming 'Queens': Young Mothers on Welfare as Cultural Readers." (PhD diss., University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2007).

¹⁷ Both the "background" and "discussion" questions were developed in consultation with teachers from agency. To view them, please visit <http://www.chrisboulton.org/academics/clothingstudy.html>

¹⁸ Williamson, "Decoding," 19.

¹⁹ Hall, "Encoding," 167.

²⁰ Stanley Fish. "Interpreting the "Variorum." *Critical Inquiry* 2, no. 3 (Spring, 1976): 465-485.

²¹ Scott, "The Bridge," 462-23, 468.

²² McQuarrie & Mick, "Visual," 51.

²³ Patricia Hill Collins. "Some Group Matters: Intersectionality, Situated Standpoints, and Black Feminist Thought." in *Feminist Frontiers*, ed. Laurel Richardson, Verta A. Taylor and Nancy Whittier (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2004) 68.

²⁴ Kennaria Brown observes that, when working amongst a similar population at the same social service agency, she quickly connected with the young mothers of color through her own identity as a black woman. But her initial rapport eventually gave way to other intersections of inequality. No matter how often she dropped her "suburbanite

persona and code-switched into [her] Black East Texas colloquialisms and diction, occasionally integrating hip-hop slang,” Brown nonetheless occupied the distinct positionality of a “middle-class, middle-aged, childless academic” and knew that this was “apparent in [her] speech, dress, and mannerisms.” Brown, “Good,” 7-8.

²⁵ Thorstein Veblen. *The Theory of the Leisure Class; an Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions*. (New York; London: The Macmillan company, 1899).

²⁶ Georg Simmel “The Philosophy of Fashion” in *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*. ed. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1997) 187.

²⁷ Pierre Bourdieu. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 205.

²⁸ Elizabeth Chin. *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) 38-40.

²⁹ Graham White and Shane White. “Strolling, Joking, and Fixy Clothes.” In *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin’ & Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture*, ed. Gena Dagal Caponi (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999). 447.

³⁰ Regina Austin. “A Nation of Thieves: Consumption, Commerce, and the Black Public Sphere.” In *The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book*, ed. Black Public Sphere Collective (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 234.

³¹ Kembreu McLeod. “Authenticity within Hip-Hop and Other Cultures Threatened with Assimilation.” *Journal of Communication* 49, no. 4 (Autumn, 1999): 143.

³² Imani Perry. *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 196.

³³ Two other LIM groups that viewed this ad had more positive reactions, noting in their written responses that the single “modern mom” in the picture looked like a “fit mom” who was “decent” and “properly dressed.” As most of these young women are unmarried, an image of a lone mother with her child could certainly resonate with their own lives.

³⁴ Kimora Lee and Russell Simmons divorced in early 2006, but continue to appear together in ads and at events promoting Phat Farm and Baby Phat clothing. Nancy Jo. Sales. “Unbearable Fabulosity.” *Vanity Fair*, April 2005 (accessed December 4, 2006) 1.

³⁵ See Juan Flores. *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) 138, who argues that Puerto-Ricans have a “long

history of cultural interaction with African Americans,” and “helped make rap what it was to become” such that “hip hop emerged as a cultural space shared by Puerto Ricans and Blacks.”

³⁶ Another AM that I interviewed had a similar interpretation. She had never heard of Baby Phat and thought that the girls in the ad looked “evocative and inappropriately erotic” like “exotic dancers” or “geisha.”

³⁷ The other two groups of LIMs heartily agreed: “that’s exactly how I would dress my son.” Only one had a negative reaction, writing that they were “too young to be dressing thuggish and they look like bad kids.” This woman was, perhaps not coincidentally, one of the only two white LIMs who participated in this study.

³⁸ Nicole Fleetwood. “Hip-Hop Fashion, Masculine Anxiety, & the Discourse of Americana.” in *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*, ed. Harry Justin Elam and Kennell A. Jackson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005) 327.

³⁹ McLeod, “Authenticity,” 145. For more on the origins and controversies of hip-hop codes see Malcolm Barnard. *Fashion as Communication*. (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), Alex Kotlowitz. “False Connections.” in *The Consumer Society Reader*, ed. Juliet Schor and Douglas B. Holt (New York, NY: New Press, 2000) 502, and Emil, Wilbekin. “Great Aspirations: Hip Hop and Fashion Dress for Excess and Success.” in *The Vibe History of Hip Hop*, ed. Alan Light (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999) 418.

⁴⁰ John Berger. *Ways of Seeing*. (London; New York: British Broadcasting Corporation; Penguin Books, 1977) 46. Laura Mulvey. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) .

⁴¹ In *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) 26, Judith Levine argues that the media sensationalizes and magnifies the few isolated incidents of child-sex crimes committed by strangers, when the vast majority of sexual abuse is committed by parents against their own children. In other words, the more pressing social problem is incest, not the random child molester. But she also understands the limits of facts. “Rational talk may mean nothing to a parent. Nine in forty-five million children are raped and murdered: slim odds, sure, but if it happens to your baby, who cares about statistics?”